

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

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CREATE A BACKYARD HABITAT TO ATTRACT BIRDS AND BUTTERFLIES

I do a lot of looking around at garden centers and nurseries and am more impressed each year with the ever-widening range and diversity of plants available. Just a few years ago perennials were relegated to a small section in the back and now they are prominently displayed in the largest space. That's good to see; it shows how we American gardeners have matured.

Another thing I am seeing more of is the development of theme gardens. I think it is fundamental that all gardeners do what we can to create gardens to attract wildlife. You don't need a very big space to do this. Start small and work on just attracting birds and butterflies the first year. By planting certain annuals, perennials, shrubs and trees you can attract particular butterfly species to your garden, whether you live in town or the country. Choosing the right plants and creating protective cover for birds will bring in a wide range of these winged beauties.

Hummingbirds, everybody's favorite, flock to certain flowers for nectar. Bee balm (*Monarda didyma*), cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), Hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*), columbine (*Aquilegia*), bleeding heart (*Dicentra*), foxglove (*Digitalis*), trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) and trumpet honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*) are good choices to bring in these amazing little creatures.

Other species of birds are attracted to perennials like coreopsis (*Coreopsis*), oriental poppies (*Papaver orientale*), and forget-me-nots (*Myosotis*). Goldfinches love the seeds of black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) and purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*).

When planning the wildlife garden, keep in mind that birds need the shelter (and food) provided by trees and shrubs to feel safe enough to enter. Plan for both deciduous and evergreen trees. Dogwoods (*Cornus florida*), hawthorns (*Crataegus*), crabapples (*Malus*) and downy serviceberries (*Amelanchier canadensis*) provide bright berries for birds, while evergreens such as junipers (*Juniperus*), pines (*Pinus*), spruces (*Picea*) and hemlocks (*Tsuga*) provide protection and nesting areas.

Berries of shrubs that attract birds include winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), several viburnums (*Viburnum*), blueberry (*Vaccinium*), purple beautyberry (*Callicarpa dichotoma*), cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster*), and scarlet firethorn (*Pyracantha*).

Butterflies are day-feeders and are attracted to bright colored flowers and their sweet nectars. Moths are night feeders and are lured by white flowers and powerful fragrances. There may be hundreds or even thousands of other insects that visit a plant-rich yard, each looking for their own favorite food.

Unfortunately, some insects are considered pests (although it is less than 15 percent of all species) because they chew on leaves or drink plant juices and destroy our hard work. How do you control pests while attracting wanted insects? That's the million-dollar question and I don't have the short answer.

Remember that you can't spray insecticides and reach only pests. Some good guys will fall also. Use an integrated pest management approach. Start with healthy soil and keep plants well watered. Walk through your garden often and be observant of potential problems. Space plants correctly and plant shade lovers in shade, sun lovers in sun. Scout for problems and hand pick or spot-spray troublemakers. Provide a water source to encourage birds. Bat houses will bring in these insect-hungry creatures.

Everyone loves butterflies. The classic plant for attracting them is the well-named butterfly bush (*Buddleia davidii*). Once you have seen dozens of them flitting about on this plant you will be hooked and want more. Some plants provide food for butterfly larva, some nectar for adults, and some plants do both.

Plant your butterfly garden in a south or southwestern direction to provide the afternoon sun butterflies love. Moisture sources such as puddles or depressions are also needed. Butterflies exhibit a group behavior called "puddling" where they drink up moisture and get minerals from muddy areas.

The list of plants that attract butterflies is long, but includes butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), daylilies (*Hemerocallis*), hibiscus, Joe Pye weed (*Eupatodum*), phlox, scabiosa, Sedum 'Autumn Joy', spiderwort (*Tradescantia*) and ajuga. Annuals for butterflies include gomphrena, zinnias and Mexican sunflower (*Thonia*).

Many plants have the dual role of attracting both butterflies and birds, including the above-mentioned cardinal flower, columbine, butterfly weed and honeysuckle. Others, including purple coneflower and certain *Liatris* species also attract both.

Once the butterflies are gone and the weather gets cold, don't forget to continue feeding the birds. They will come to depend on you and will tell their friends where a bird-friendly yard is located. The above-mentioned trees and shrubs that provide berries need to be supplemented with feeders. Remember that birds eat and build their nests at different levels. Some ground feeders, like mourning doves, sparrows, cardinals, towhees, thrashers and dark-eyed juncos will appreciate a slightly open spot with feeding trays close to ground level.

Tube feeders full of niger seed will attract small birds like goldfinches, house finches, pine siskins and black-capped chickadees, but these birds will also dine on purple coneflower and black-eyed Susan seeds. Nuthatches, blue jays and woodpeckers will also visit feeders filled with mixed birdseed, each picking out their favorite.

I have only scratched the surface of how to create a bird and butterfly habitat. There are entire books on the subject and I encourage you to search them out at your local library or favorite bookstore. Once you get started attracting butterflies and birds to your garden you will become addicted. I guarantee it. Enjoy!

For more information on gardening in Virginia, visit the Green Industry Council's Web site at www.viriniagardening.com.